



# One on One with Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Catherine D. (Kitty) Kimball

Interviewed by Barry H. Grodsky



*Chief Justice Catherine D. (Kitty) Kimball will retire from the Louisiana Supreme Court in January 2013, after 20 years of service on the court. Elected in November 1992 from the Fifth Supreme Court District, she became the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court. In January 2009, she was sworn in as chief justice, making her the first woman chief justice in Louisiana.*

Prior to her service on the Louisiana Supreme Court, Chief Justice Kimball served as a district court judge in the 18th Judicial District for 10 years, including two years as chief judge. Her legal career also has included work as a sole practitioner (1975-82) and as an assistant district attorney (1978-82). She received her JD degree in 1970 from Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center.

During her career, she has served on numerous legal and professional associations. Among them, she has chaired the Louisiana Supreme Court Case Management Information System Task Force, the Louisiana Supreme Court Technology Committee, the Judiciary Subcommittee of the Southeast Louisiana Criminal Justice Recovery Task Force, the Judicial Budgetary Control Board and the Integrated Criminal Justice Information System Policy Board. She also was a member of the Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission, the Louisiana Law Enforcement Commission, the U.S. Department of Justice National Integration Resource Center Task Force and the Louisiana Children's Cabinet.

**Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Catherine D. Kimball.** *Photo provided by Kimball family.*





## One on One with Chief Justice Catherine D. (Kitty) Kimball

**Journal:** When did you first know you wanted to be a lawyer? What motivated you?

**Kimball:** It was kind of strange. I was riding to Texas A&M with a friend of my Dad's, who was visiting his son, also a friend of mine. The family had been friends forever. He asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I was just coming out of high school and I said I didn't know. He said I should think about going to law school and becoming a lawyer. I gave it some thought and finally decided it was something I could do and have something I could fall back on if I wanted to work, or needed to work . . . and not have to get a job at TG&Y or a dime store. But I never intended to work, ever.

**Journal:** What made you decide to seek a seat on the Louisiana Supreme Court?

**Kimball:** My whole career has been a little odd. I was on the District Court and I loved being on the District Court. When a vacancy came up, lots of lawyers were not pleased with the candidates in the race and started asking me to run. I had no thought of ever doing this. But Leah Guerry — a friend of mine for years — called me. She was the executive director of the Louisiana Trial Lawyers Association, now the Louisiana Association for Justice. She said her president wanted to talk to me about running for the Supreme Court. I said I don't want to run for the Supreme Court, but eventually, I said yes. When I spoke to him, I told him I didn't know if I wanted to do this. I told him that in my District Court job I can help people whose kids have drug problems. I can help domestic violence victims. I like that. He said just think about how much more you can do at the higher level. That hooked me and I thought I'd give it a shot. He was right. We've done a lot of things at our level. The Supreme Court impacts a lot more people with how we handle domestic violence issues and by creating drug courts.

**Journal:** We have done a lot of work with mentoring. It's a big area of the Bar's focus. Did you have any mentors in your career?

**Kimball:** When I came to New Roads to practice by myself in 1975, the lawyers in town were so helpful. Any time I had a problem, you could ask any lawyer in town . . . one fellow in particular, Robert Kearney, who was the nicest guy in the world. I had some of the weirdest cases. Somebody went out in a boat in the Mississippi River and disappeared and never came back and they wanted to find out if this was some sort of admiralty case — a big boat ran over a little boat. Declaring people dead and all kinds of things that you'd see on TV. Another lady wanted to know if she could get a divorce and not say she had a child because the child was not the child of her husband. This was way before the days people talked about birth mothers and other things. I called the Supreme Court and they told me I could not do this. Weird things. I'd call Robert or other lawyers and talk to them about situations and they were always helpful. In a small town, there was just the practicing bar. There wasn't anything like an official mentoring program, but you knew you could go to any lawyer if you had a problem. They were always glad to help you.

**Journal:** What was your family's role in your wanting to be a judge and justice?

**Kimball:** At any point, if they ever would have said, "No, don't go forward," that would have been the end of it. My family was always supportive, and I always looked for support from them. If my children said, "No, Mom, don't run for the Supreme Court," it would have been over. I wouldn't have done it.

**Journal:** In your tenure on the Supreme Court, have there been any cases you would deem the most significant?

**Kimball:** Not really, because all of our cases are significant . . . as they should be or we shouldn't be granting a writ. I can't point to one or one group of them that have more significance than another. I think they are all important.

**Journal:** The Bar has placed a focus on professionalism, making it more noticeable. As a lawyer, judge and justice, have you seen an improvement in or a decline in professionalism?

**Kimball:** From when I first started, definitely there has been a decline in professionalism. But I think things have gotten better since the focus has increased and an emphasis has been placed on professionalism. Thanks to the efforts of the LSBA and the bench, attorneys are paying more attention to what it means to act "professional," and it is starting to improve.

**Journal:** What has changed in the practice of law today?

**Kimball:** Everything has gotten more complicated because life has gotten more complicated. Issues are more complicated, cases as well. Things used to be simpler than they are now.

**Journal:** Do you have any tips to share for practitioners to do a better job before the Louisiana Supreme Court and other courts?

**Kimball:** The same things that anybody would say in any court — preparation. One of the things some people don't concentrate on in our court is they don't completely understand the function of why they are there. There are so close to their own case that they don't realize it is not their case that is of interest but the issue that their case presents. The issue is much broader than just their case. When they get a writ, they need to focus on the issue that got them there and where does this issue go from here, besides the issues between these two parties.

**Journal:** Do you have any advice for the incoming Chief Justice?

**Kimball:** I don't know if I'd give her any advice. She's been on the court for 18 years. We talk daily or every other day and I am more than happy to do what I can to help her. I send her lots of correspondence from all over the country. But she doesn't need any advice. She knows what's out there.

**Journal:** You have had a wonderful tenure on the court. Looking back, what is your greatest accomplishment?

**Kimball:** One of the things I've been interested in is the administrative functions of the court. One of the main things that



sticks out is our drug court operation. We took over the funding for all the drug courts in the state. We monitor them, keep up with them, work with them. That's one of the highlights. I'm also proud of the involvement I have had with issues affecting children, such as working with the Sunshine Foundation, which provides books to preschoolers. I have also been involved for many years with juvenile justice reform and the work of the Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission. Our juvenile justice system isn't perfect, but it certainly is in better shape than when I first came to the Supreme Court 20 years ago.

**Journal:** What did you enjoy the most about being a justice?

**Kimball:** All of the interaction from the administrative duties. I was liaison to the district judges and I worked with them on their projects. I was the legislative liaison. I worked with the Legislature on everything we did legislatively over the years. I have enjoyed the most all of the administrative kinds of things we have gotten to do, including with the Bar and with the judges. Not that I don't enjoy the opinions, some are enjoyable and some not so much fun.

**Journal:** Now that the end of your time on the court is near, do you have any great future plans?

**Kimball:** Not yet. Since my stroke, I'm trying to learn to live at a slower pace. I thought I was fine working 80-100 hours a week. I didn't see anything wrong with that, but my body didn't think it was so fine. I am trying to learn to step it down a bit.

**Journal:** Now that you are leaving the court, what do you think will be your legacy?

**Kimball:** I really don't think about my legacy. That's for others to decide.

**Journal:** Would you like to pass on some advice you have gleaned from your legal career?

**Kimball:** Do the best you can with what you have. That's advice I have received ever since I was a little child.

**Journal:** Have there been other judges you looked up to and admired?

**Kimball:** I'm sure there were. I've met a broad range of people. No one particular person. But when I went on the bench here, Judge Ian Claiborne had been on the bench for a long time. He was a very smart man. I looked up to him a lot over the years. I was fortunate to be appointed to the District Judges Executive Committee in my first year as a trial judge. That role meant traveling around the state and meeting lots of trial judges. I looked up to a lot of them.

**Journal:** What would you have been if you had not been a lawyer or judge?

**Kimball:** The only thing I can possibly think of is my Dad was CEO and a major stockholder in an insurance company in

Alexandria. I'm assuming I would have worked for him. But I never planned to work, period. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. She got her master's degree in special education after my youngest brother graduated from high school. I had four brothers and a stay-at-home mom. I thought I'd get married and stay at home, too. That didn't work. The marriage, of course, did — 45 years strong. But staying at home when you have three babies and no money, that didn't work. So working wasn't such a bad option.

**Journal:** Is there anything fun or interesting about you that we don't know that you can share with us?

**Kimball:** Well, I don't know what that would be. I don't really have any hobbies. All I ever did was work, which is why I had this stroke. One thing I do now is that every morning I get on my iPad and do "Brain Pop," which is an app consisting of a daily brain exercise and memory trainer. It's also a lot of fun and educational.

**Journal:** When you were first out of law school, you worked in the Attorney General's office?

**Kimball:** I first clerked for a federal judge, Nauman Scott in Alexandria, then I went to the AG's office, the first lawyer hired in the Criminal Division.

**Journal:** Who were others you worked with in the AG's office?

**Kimball:** I worked with several law clerks in the AG's office. Mike Ponder was hired as a lawyer in the Criminal Division. Freddie Pitcher and Ralph Tyson were law clerks there when they were still in law school. John Sinquefield was hired after me. Richard Ieyoub was one of the clerks. I met quite a few people there who were helpful to me in later years. After I became a justice, Richard came down and introduced his wife, saying I used to be his boss. I told him, "Hate to tell you, honey, I still am!"

**Journal:** Do you have any advice to those thinking about a career in the law?

**Kimball:** They need to commit to a lifelong experience of studying.

**Journal:** Is there anything we haven't asked you that we should have asked you?

**Kimball:** Let me just say that I am so happy that I have no more elections to run. It's nice to look at them from the outside instead of from the inside. ♦

*Barry H. Grodsky, a partner in the New Orleans firm of Taggart Morton, L.L.C., is currently serving as First Board District representative on the Louisiana State Bar Association's Board of Governors. He is a member of the Louisiana Bar Journal Editorial Board and chairs the LSBA's Committee on the Profession. He will become the LSBA secretary and Journal editor in June 2013. (Ste. 2100, 1100 Poydras St., New Orleans, LA 70163)*

